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HOW TO TEACH AN ESSAY.

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TEACHING A CLASS HOW TO READ AN ESSAY INCLUDES LISTENING, DISCUSSING, AND WRITING, IN ADDITION TO READING. IN THEIR LITERATURE COURSES, THE AUTHORS BEGIN THE PROCESS AT THE FIRST MEETING, USING EITHER THE PRESCRIBED TEXT OR DUPLICATED MATERIALS. PRELIMINARY READING BY THE CLASS IS FOLLOWED BY DISCUSSION BASED ON STUDENT QUESTIONS, ANALYSIS, AND EXPLICATION. THE AIM, WHICH NEVER VARIES, IS TO SHOW HOW TO DEFINE WORDS IN CONTEXT, TO ACCOUNT FOR EVERY RHETORICAL DEVICE AT WORK IN A PASSAGE, TO PARAPHRASE AND SUMMARIZE ACCURATELY, AND TO MOVE SENSITIVELY THROUGH A PROGRESSION. THE PROCESS REQUIRES TIME, AND STUDENTS MUST LEARN TO TAKE THEIR TIME, FOR MASTERY OF SIGNIFICANT MATERIALS AND RELIABLE METHODS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE NUMBER OF ASSIGNMENTS COMPLETED. DICTATION OF PRINCIPLES AND STUDY GUIDES IS AN EFFECTIVE METHOD IN TRAINING STUDENTS TO LISTEN AND BEHAVE IN SUCH A WAY THAT THEY MAY MAKE USE OF THEIR NOTES AND OTHER WRITINGS. USING THESE IDEAS, THE AUTHORS PRESENT A GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF A SPECIFIC ESSAY. (WO)

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HOW TO TEACH AN ESSAY

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By: Muriel Blatt and Jean Wilkinson

A. INTRODUCTION TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Although there are many ways to teach an essay, and every instructor will have a style of his own, we offer this material as one way, one set of proven methods by means of which a class can be shown how to read an essay. We have borrowed the italics from a student in one of our "How To" sessions, who expressed the shock of discovery thus: "You mean something different when you say read, don't you?" Yes, we do. And we also mean that the instructor must expend a considerable amount of effort in preparing himself and the class for the process of understanding non-fiction. Our system includes listening, discussing, and writing as well as reading.

Because example counts for more than precept, we make no mystery of our procedures; we show a class from the very beginning that we have done what we expect them to do. We prepare them in advance to meet the assignment, getting to work at once, at the first meeting of the term. If everyone has a text, we can move to section II of this guide; if not, we hand out dittos of the first and second paragraphs of the essay, double-spaced, with wide margins. Students must learn to read with (preferably) a lead pencil in hand - glossing, questioning, and marking for future reference as they go along. Every page of every assignment, whether ditto or text, should bear the signs of study.

Assuming at this point that we have only the dittos for the rest of the first meeting and perhaps for the second, we make the first two paragraphs into a sort of microcosm, a little pattern by which to read the larger one. The class is told to read the ditto once silently, marking anything not clearly understood. (Almost no one will do this efficiently). Then we read the paragraphs aloud, molto espressivo. Now the questioning may begin, ours and theirs. We have never yet had a class that remained mute; so we have been able to depend upon student questions for opening the discussion. If, however, the recitation is scanty or slow, we begin a model analysis and explication, usually gathering help from the class as we proceed. Our aim, which never varies, is to show how to define words in context, to account for every rhetorical device at work in a passage, to paraphrase and summarize accurately, and in brief, to move sensitively through a progression. The students should be writing definitions and other notes on their ditto sheets as the discussion advances. A lumpish passivity should never be allowed to become the style of this class.

The instructor should not fear to use the first two sessions for this demonstration, because introductory literature classes must be taught to take their time. The mastery of significant materials and reliable methods is what counts, not the number of assignments; and the instructor must school himself not to measure his own accomplishment by how many times the class has "covered".

At the end of the first or second hour, depending upon local circumstances, some questions for guiding home-study should be put on the board or (a very good practice) dictated. These students need to be trained in listening and in behaving as if there were a future - that is, as if they will be making use of their notes and other writings.

B. INTRODUCING THE ESSAY TO THE CLASS: "THE HORSELESS COWBOYS"
(John A. Popplestone, "The Horseless Cowboys", from A Lively Collection of Contemporary Essays; editors, Blatt and Wilkinson; Aegeus Publishing Co., 1967.)

1. GENERAL

Now let us assume that everyone has a text and that the instructor intends to use the first two paragraphs as we have done with the dittos above. However, there are certain advantages to be gained from the mere physical appearance of the printed matter, and from the opportunity to look at it as one example of a literary type.

Because we have heard too many students refer to essays as "stories", we take nothing for granted. We discuss briefly the differences between fiction and non-fiction, and remind the class that it has already met many examples of the expository, descriptive, narrative, and personal essay in various kinds of books and periodicals, and on radio and television. So as not to prolong the lecture period at this stage of teaching, we reserve technical terms for future sessions; but within two or three weeks we make sure that terms like article, treatise, tract, journal, periodical, explication, definition, analysis, theme, etc., enter the working vocabulary of the class.

2. THE FORMAT

The next step is to make the class aware of the text as an object. These students (and far too many of our more advanced ones) are not alert and competent viewers of writing; so we call their attention to the author's name and his qualifications for writing, the title of the essay, the head-note, and the source of the essay (on the Acknowledgments page). It is useful to comment on the length of the work. "The Horseless Cowboys" is comparatively short, but that doesn't mean that we should pile on extra assignments: let the students begin to appreciate our methods and to sense the pleasures that come from intensive work with substantial materials.

Note the divisions in the essay. Since all literature is apprehended by parts, and these sections are the primary subdivisions of the whole into passages, the class should see that they are rhetorical devices and aids to comprehension. Furthermore, the sub-titles are puns, and there is a lesson in the word-play. We like to incorporate these headings and their implications in the home-study suggestions, for they indicate one of the ways in which Popplestone has ordered his composition and reinforced his concern with metaphor.

[If we want to assign a short writing exercise in the first week, we ask the class to experiment in composing an appropriate sub-title for the opening section of the essay, giving their reasons for the choice. These papers should be scanned for ideas, but not graded.]

3. THE SECOND AND THIRD CLASS-HOURS, with an Excursus on Vocabulary Study

(a) General

We have had such good results with the method outlined in Section I that we recommend following it here. Combined with items A and B in this section, it will comfortably fill three class-hours without exhausting the resources of the two paragraphs. However, we now want to turn from the general explication to a specific problem, vocabulary. We shall resume the larger discussion in Section III, "Getting Into the Essay."

(b) Vocabulary

The chief problem is this: in what class are students to receive concentrated vocabulary study - reading lab, vocabulary-development, or literature? We possess the first two at Pierce College, and they are a blessing. But if you don't have such outside assistance, then make up your mind very early about how much general and special vocabulary work you think you can do in the literature class. You will find that you simply cannot cover every word in the lists we supply, unless you do nothing but vocabulary - and this isn't your primary duty. With any essay, vocabulary should be the first item taught after the introductory materials. You will realize how much labor a reading lab or vocabulary class can save you, when you see this list:

GENERAL VOCABULARY FROM "THE HORSELESS COWBOYS"

satirical	expedient	elicited
degenerated	prototypical	erotic
forlorn	discipline	inherent
transformation	invertebrates	blatant
detract	vertebrates	ostentatiously
addicted	conjure	inducement
psychotherapist	stimuli	ambiguous
fantasy	à la	emblazoned
vicarious	unequivocal	super-ego
exoskeletal		

We suggest that you make such a list for every essay you teach. At the beginning of the term, ditto your list and give a copy to every student)and to the vocabulary instructors, if they want to coöperate). It will also be helpful to add special terms and phrases to be found in the essay, all of which together comprise a master list for the

given selection. The whole thing may be put on the board, or dictated, if dittoing takes too much time. For this essay, these items should appear:

Kid	Marshal Dillon
exoskeletal defense	Casper Milquetoast
admaker's dream	Marquis de Sade
eau de cowboy	John Stetson
bull market	Duke of Wellington
Levi Strauss	Earl of Cardigan
rendezvous	vaquero

By the next meeting, every student must have written, and inserted in his notebook, definitions of all the words he didn't know on the list, and be working with the terms that follow, until he has finished the entire collection. Check the work in class recitation. Have the students paraphrase and explicate passages containing some of the more difficult words, for you are going to discover that most of them have not yet learned how to apply dictionary definitions to a context. This process will take time, far more time than it should, but these students must understand that they are responsible for every word in every assignment.

Obviously, you can't always perform this meticulously; so you must set up check-points in every essay and at intervals throughout the term in order to keep the students working at vocabulary. It will be enough in the next few sessions to ask at the beginning of a discussion what words or passages gave trouble. Elicit answers from the class, and base your opening remarks and questions on a particularly fruitful offering. You must expect to have to shift your strategies when you've begun in this way, but you know the essay well enough to bring the discussion back to your own themes.

If you have outside helps, you will not have to spend so much time on the master list. You can break it down in several ways; we append two groupings which will move a class into the substance of the essay, and a third which will provide drill in word-elements:

(1) Define each of these terms in the context of this essay:

canned fantasy	exoskeletal defense
masculine prototype	admaker's dream
feminine image	eau de cowboy
vicarious experience	tooled leather
à la	American fantasy

(2) Identify the following persons:

Marshal Dillon	Casper Milquetoast
Levi Strauss	Jesse James
Cinderella	John Stetson
Marquis de Sade	Duke of Wellington

(3) Break these words down into their elements, and define all the elements:

super-ego	detract
addicted	psychotherapist
degenerated	transformation
expedient	prototypical
vertebrate	invertebrates
conjure	emblazoned
unequivocal	elicited

inducement

C. GETTING INTO THE ESSAY

We take up once more the general outline interrupted at Section C, point 1, assuming that the class has read the essay and done some vocabulary work. They may even have discussed parts of the essay while pursuing a vocabulary item. Whatever the local situation, return to the two opening paragraphs and start moving systematically through the essay. The class will be learning how to deal with the work as a progression, an unfolding.

Having practiced at home, read the first and second paragraphs aloud. These students need to hear their language read well - accurately and feelingly; they must be helped to listen. (If your speech department has a course in listening, such as Los Angeles City College offers, this is the time to coördinate your efforts with it.) Oral interpretation allows you to make a quick vocabulary and reading-comprehension check. If the probe shows that the class has not understood the process you have been teaching, STOP. Make them tell you in what specific ways Cat Ballou is a satirical movie; what all the implications of "gorgeous" Jane Fonda are; what a Cinderella transformation is, for men as well as women; what a ceremonial arming is (see any epic or mock-epic); in what ways Sheleen is a comic character; and how his arming can reconstruct his manhood. This essay is so well constructed that its major themes are prefigured in these two paragraphs.

It may be that your class is prepared to recite intelligently. If so, you can use the questions implied in the above series as a guide to discussion and not as a reading-comprehension test. Or you may use any one of the questions for a short in-class writing.

D. THE PROGRESSION: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR ORAL OR WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

E. THE PROGRESSION

1. What is a "satirical" Western?

2. List the examples which Popplestone gives to demonstrate that Cat Ballou is a satire.

3. Drawing upon your general knowledge of Westerns, what other characteristics, or conventions, are probably satirized in the film? You can answer this even if you haven't seen the movie. Why?

4. Explain this statement: "That Sheleen is a character in a Western doesn't detract from the reality of his behavior." What is meant by "reality" here? How does the statement apply to one of the main themes of the essay?

5. What other "canned" fantasies can you name? Could essays like this one be derived from them? If so, choose one, state its theme, and outline its development.

6. What is suggested by the image of a "demesticated American"? How does Casper Milquetoast, mentioned latar, fit into the picture? What is suggested by the spelling of his surname?

7. What methods were used to answer the question which Popplestone asks about the purchase of Western wear? (Paragraph 2, "Bull Market in Western Wear"). What do you think of the survey? Would you have used other symbols?

8. Discuss each of the following as specifically "Western traits": masculinity, aggressiveness, sexiness. Do they characterize any other kind of folk hero in our literature? Explain.

9. Explicate: "The Marquis de Sade was not necessarily the inspiration..."

10. Draw the rear view of a real cowhand who is wearing Levis "tailored to fit close." [He is bowlegged.]

11. Why is the admaker's dream "the man who prefers to read appearances rather than essences"?

12. What does the word essence mean in the question above and in the first sentence of the "Eau de Cowboy" section? Describe the word play between Eau and essence in the latter example.

13. How can one justify calling a tattoo an "exoskeletal defence"?

14. Explicate: "A man may behave like Casper Milquetoast, but he can feel that others see him as Marshal Dillon or even Jesse James."

15. FINAL WORD TO THE INSTRUCTOR:

The anthology from which we have taken this essay includes several others that can be used to form a cluster for more extended discussion of the themes and devices explored in our questions. (The same is true for almost any text.) The teacher's manual should always be consulted before a lesson plan is drawn up; any guide worth the name will contain suggestions for bringing comparable materials together.